

# Nicaragua: From War to Peace

**General Joaquín Cuadra Lacayo, National Army of Nicaragua, Retired**

*At Military Review's invitation, General Joaquín Cuadra Lacayo, retired Commander in Chief of the National Army of Nicaragua, wrote this article to offer advice on how to move the post-major combat operations insurgency environment in Iraq and Afghanistan toward a program of national stability and democratization.*

*Cuadra expresses no personal judgment concerning the appropriateness of current U.S. involvement in Iraq or Afghanistan: he offers his views as an experienced professional military officer advising other military professionals about fundamental concepts needing to be considered in any general conflict in which democratization is the stated aim. While Cuadra's comments have been translated, they are as near to the original as possible.*

*Military Review does not endorse Cuadra's views, especially in regard to the roles other Latin American armies might play in their respective nations. However, the perspective he provides might prove extremely valuable to the serious study of ongoing contemporary conflicts.*

**B**ETWEEN 1979 and 1990, two important transitions took place in Nicaragua. The first occurred after Anastasio Somoza's dictatorship came to an end. The second occurred after the Sandinista National Liberation Front's electoral defeat. Although both events took place under conditions of violence and war, elections and negotiations were key to the outcome. These two events determined Nicaragua's advance from being a State completely lacking established institutions to one of emerging institutionalism. Still, progress has not fully reached all of Nicaragua's institutions, namely, political parties and those that deal with justice or the resolution of such issues as poverty.

Nicaragua continues to be a society where politics depend on "bosses." However, the great successes in the pacification of Nicaragua are due to the significant transformation in the nature of coercive power. The State now exercises the power the Army and police previously wielded.

Despite being the second poorest country in Latin America, Nicaragua is one of the safest countries of the continent. The murder rate is about 3.4 per 100,000 inhabitants—a lower rate than that of any large city in the United States. This is a level of public safety superior to that of its neighbors and to the majority of other Latin American countries. In spite

of the instability that still exists, which is a product of infighting between local leaders, political violence manifested in its most dangerous expressions (armed groups, terrorists, or organized crime) is almost nonexistent. While political unrest causes many casualties in Argentina, Bolivia, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, street protests in Nicaragua, while frequent, seldom result in deaths. And, although the justice system is politicized, there are no serious violations of human rights.

How was it possible to achieve these positive results? How was it that Nicaragua performed the transition from dictatorial power to revolutionary power and, from it, to democratic institutional power? Without doubt, the positive and negative lessons of the Nicaraguan experience can be of great use in other pacification processes.

The backbone of success was the construction and institutionalization of the Army and the police. Within the framework of the conflict and the process of transformation of the Ejército Popular Sandinista (EPS) to the National Army of Nicaragua, a doctrine of internal security based on preserving territorial control was formed. This, in turn, furthered the creation of a legal order that institutionally separated the Army from the political sector of the country. The result is that society has remained protected by an efficient institution that manages public security, while acting as guarantor in precluding political confrontations from culminating in armed conflict.

By imbuing institutional life into itself, the Army distanced itself from local leaders' infighting to make it more difficult for any particular person or interest

General Joaquín Cuadra Lacayo, retired Commander in Chief of the National Army of Nicaragua, has been a major participant in Nicaraguan political history since the 1970s. At 20 years of age, he joined the Sandinista guerrilla movement in its fight against Anastasio Somoza's government, widely regarded as among the most corrupt in the Western Hemisphere.

On 19 July 1979, following the overthrow of the Somoza regime and assumption of rule by the Sandinista party, Cuadra was designated Chief of Staff of the Sandinista Peoples' Army, whose mission was to transform Sandinista guerrilla columns into a Regular Army. During this time, Nicaragua and the United States were pitted against each other against the backdrop of a Cold War-era ideological divide that resulted in armed conflict in Central America.



General Joaquín Cuadra Lacayo

As a result, during the 1980s, Cuadra directed operational and tactical efforts against the Contra movement supported by U.S. President Ronald Reagan's administration.

In 1989, Cuadra participated in the negotiation and signing of the Peace Accords that produced free elections in Nicaragua. Subsequently, he led efforts to transform and professionalize the Sandinista Peoples' Army.

In 1994, he was promoted to General of the Army and named Commander in Chief by President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. During the next 5 years, the Sandinista People's Army was redesignated the Army of Nicaragua, furthering the Army's professionalization and depolitization supporting a democratization that has fundamentally changed Nicaragua's political institutions, military forces, and social order.

group to use it as an instrument for personal gain. Today, with regard to stability and security in Nicaragua, the Army and police are the most important institutions. Nicaragua is an exemplary case when compared with Ecuador, Venezuela, Chile, Guatemala, Honduras, and Cuba, among others, where Army and political institutions remain intertwined or where the Army continues to be the real base of power.

It was impossible to end Somoza's dictatorship without unleashing an excess of revolutionary ideology. Extreme conditions produce extreme positions. The ideologically charged sentiment during the antidictatorial period grew even more pronounced with the policies of the Reagan Administration. The United States made no serious effort to comprehend that Nicaragua was following its own path toward political maturity and that, therefore, there was no escape from the rhetoric and the frightening attitudes, which were difficult to understand but completely logical under the circumstances.

The Nicaraguan people were unable to emerge from 45 years of dictatorship with a mature and civil political system. The primitive system, characterized by powerful local leaders who disperse favors and rewards, is still present in Nicaragua and can be seen in the different political undercurrents that are a direct consequence of that period and will take time to overcome.

This extensive, polemic point demonstrates the error of interpreting the situation simply in terms of ideology. The United States dedicated itself to destroying Nicaragua's Army, but paradoxically, the Army now provides stability for the nation. Had the Nicaraguan Army been destroyed, the country would continue to be at war. The United States supported the Venezuelan Army, which allegedly was cast in the U.S. Army's likeness but today is the center of that country's instability. The greatest lesson to be learned is that one would do well not to respond to an ideologically charged situation with an ideological interpretation.

What resulted from the insurrection against the dictatorship and the war against the counterrevolutionary resistance was that the Army saw itself as obligated to organize its territorial deployment in alignment to communities. There simply was no other possible alternative beyond any relative ideological interpretation dealing with a revolutionary peoples' army. The Army could only be effective if it emphasized the human factor. Today, this relationship with the community forms the doctrinal pillar of Nicaraguan internal security, which makes the

police more effective, despite being a small force with an extremely small budget. The relation with the community facilitated the Nicaraguan Army's conversion after the war to an active corps of personnel engaged in civil support activities in the community. The lesson is that a coercive power, without social support networks, cannot provide pacification or security.

When Somoza's regime was overturned, the National Guard was completely dismantled: there was no intention of partially or temporarily preserving its structure. The organization was stigmatized, and its members were considered assassins. The National Guard's disintegration furthered the organization of the Contreras nucleus. Later, serious errors in revolutionary agrarian policies contributed to the emergence of a base of social support for the Contreras. U.S. military support, coupled with the two previously mentioned factors, contributed to the outbreak of another major conflict after Somoza's ouster.

When the electoral defeat of the Sandinista government occurred in 1990, a highly volatile situation arose in which radical groups and likeminded supporters in the United States opposed to the Sandinistas attempted to interpret electoral results as a call for overthrowing the government. The potential that a rural border war would become a generalized civil war seemed to be the order of the day. The justification for war would have been ideological in nature, but this would have been contrary to the real motivation behind the vote of the majority of the Nicaraguan people: they had voted for peace. In contrast to what occurred during Somoza's overthrow, Chamorro and her government negotiated and came to terms with the transition and were willing to respect the incipient institutionalization the revolution had created. Doing so allowed for the most free and widely participative elections in Nicaragua's history.

The EPS's preservation and the National Army's subsequent reformation (separate from politics and subordinate to civil authority) were the principal factors that precluded a renewal of confrontation. In this case, the lesson is quite clear: total collapse can create chaos and spur new, even bloodier conflicts. If, in fact, the balance of forces influences the final results of a war, negotiation is not just an alternative to force, it is an instrument of war leading to the transition from violence to peace in the quickest fashion. **MR**